

THE UNITY OF ART.*

BARRY, the painter, in one of his lectures, denies, and I think justly, the truth of the ancient saying, that painting is a silent poem, and poetry a speaking picture. Painting, he contends, is rather a realization of poetry. Here is the imperfection of language: however expressive and perfect as a language, it fails in giving a precise idea or image of a complex object,—a task that painting can perfectly perform. What are words in describing a beautiful face or landscape, compared with the pencil? Many are the cases in which, while one must hopelessly fail, the other is triumphant. Moreover, the difficulties of execution are greater in painting than in poetry: power of conception, or the inventive faculty, is more indispensable to the poet than to the painter; but the latter requires more accurate knowledge of the different objects embraced by his subject than the poet, and greater elaboration is necessary to represent them on canvas, in lines and colours, than to describe them in words. It might, perhaps, by some, be concluded that, for the same reason, the difficulties of execution in sculpture are greater than in painting. But, though a more intimate acquaintance with the form of objects to be represented in sculpture is doubtless requisite, this necessity is more than counterbalanced by the sculptor having fewer elements to arrange: the difficulties of combining breadth of light and shade with harmony of colour, in painting, render the demand upon the intellect of the painter far greater than any for which the sculptor must prepare. But, if the execution of a conception is more perfect in painting and sculpture than in poetry, the latter has advantages in respect of compass. In describing or embodying actions, manners, and sentiments, its capabilities are the most extensive. Poetry has the widest domain, and effects are within the range of its power to which the painter and sculptor can never hope to attain.

Again, everything expressible in painting must be within the field of the visible, while poetry, less confined, has recourse to agents and acts that are invisible: a world of mysterious and sublime imagery is thus at the service of the poet, which the painter's art denies him; and much even of visual imagery, which the poet may use, the painter must forego.

But what is most remarkable in a comparison of the arts is, that the extreme difference in mode of manifestation or diversity of operation should exist between the two elder ones: I refer to those of the architect and the poet,—the rearer of the temple and the palace, and the builder of the lofty rhyme in Apollo's fane: the former hemmed in by material and local restrictions—the latter free from both: the one shaping out its rules through the obstacles of arbitrary requirement—the other exhibiting the order and grace of harmony as by a divine intuition; the one appreciable only through the media of physical sense,—the other an almost direct communication of soul with soul; the one ascending, as it were, into the region of art from that of physical necessity—the other descending, into it from the loftiest pinnacles of spiritual aspiration.

It is evident from what has been advanced, that a subject cannot be literally translated from any one art into another. There are many circumstances in the poet's management of the materials of his subject which the painter cannot adopt: the characteristic differences of their several arts dictate, in most instances, a change of plan, an alteration of the arrangement and position of the materials as given by the poet. Or the subject must be contemplated under another phasis by the artist, who must adopt that mode of treatment which is most consonant with the nature and compass of his art. He must give up many things that the poet may make use of, and with effect. Nay, he must sacrifice, if needful, the literal truth of the reality; for what would give effect in poetry would take from it and hide or interfere with expression in painting and sculpture: this is frequently the case in the matter of drapery,

which, in poetry, is but an ethereal veil; for the poet's imagination has been behind it, and he describes what in sculpture and painting its folds would conceal. There are ideas and sentiments that could be expressed in all the five arts: they might be put in words, in colour, in relief, in structure, in sound; but though a competent mind would recognise them through all their vestments or disguises, yet the subject, being thus differently expressed, would itself be modified by the peculiarities of each organ of expression; and the proof of any one of these results being correct is, that it would call to memory and illustrate the rest. Beethoven being once asked for an explanation of one of his symphonies, replied, "Read 'The Tempest.'"

Upon the whole, poetry is the most excellent of the arts, and the true bard the most illustrious of artists. The painter, and sculptor, and architect, and musician are potentates in their own right; but they must yield the palm of superiority to him,—the Corymbus of the harmonious and immortal hand.

Thus it will, I think, be seen that, however varied its branches, art is one—an unity in diversity—one spirit working in different ways, and manifesting itself under various similitudes; and that the arts are different external phases or expressions of one soul—divers tongues uttering the same truths—variations on the great lyre of one celestial air. Art at the surface only is varied, ramified into branches of different lengths and varied calibre, unlike to the senses: at the centre it is unity of cause—one essence. Like different musical instruments, though they are not all of the same compass nor perfection of intonation, though no two are equal either in comprehensiveness or in nice inflection of sound, yet from any one of them, by a master hand, the soul of music may be drawn.

This brings me to the second main branch of my subject, in which I am to exhibit the consequences of this unity, or, in other words, the use of the doctrine. What is the practical utility of this doctrine of the Unity of Art?

There are two ways that suggest themselves to my mind, in which it might reasonably be conceived possible to benefit the artist; viz., 1st. By giving him an equal mastery over all the arts. 2nd. By giving the professor of any one art a greater mastery over that one. These we will separately investigate.

First, will it give to one man an equal mastery over all the arts? As there are three things, viz., variety, harmony, unity, requisite to constitute a true work of art, so there are three things necessary to produce one,—the hand to execute,—the mind to comprehend,—the spirit to conceive and love.

1st. The hand to execute. In every art there is an amount of manipulative power and technical knowledge, without the mastery of which no outward expression can be given to the inward conceptions; as, in painting, sculpture, and music,—power and facility of handling and touch; in architecture and poetry,—a ready and retentive knowledge of styles, orders, measures, &c. The mastery of these technicalities requires steady and long-continued practice.

2nd. The mind to comprehend. The hand can only work effectively through the mind; and, however perfect the manipulative power or technical knowledge, unless it act under the guidance of a discriminating intellect, capable of understanding principles, the issue, however elaborate in itself, will, as a work of art, be null and void.

3rd. The spirit to conceive and love. The mind can only truly and rightly comprehend when acting under the impulse of the spirit of life and love: without this spirit the artist can produce nothing that will live: with understanding alone he may reproduce the Romans, Greeks, or Italians,—but nothing that contains any spark of himself, or is properly his own—that enshrines either his reminiscences or his aspirations—can emanate from his hand. He cannot invent or create,—his work will be but coldly correct; it will possess no vitality or poetic fire, and can have no intrinsic value.

Of these powers of hand,—mind,—spirit,—the different arts require different degrees, i. e.,

they differ from each other as to the necessary proportion of these powers: in one, feeling will be most wanting; in another, intellect will preponderate,—the rest being in abeyance. Poetry draws most upon the intellect,—music on the feeling: in these arts the mechanical part compared with the intellectual and emotional is as nothing; while, perhaps, the greatest and most complete combination of the mechanical with the intellectual that anywhere exists, is seen in paintings. According to the proportion, therefore, in which these qualities exist in the artist, he is fitter for one than for another; or the man that is possessed of a nearly equal amount of these powers is determined in his choice by circumstance. Architecture or painting may hold out bread; poetry, (a well-founded surmise) withhold it; or circumstance may rob one art of a follower, and give him to another. Of this several instances could be given. Circumstances generally call louder for one than another: London is burnt down: a city is to be rebuilt; and the genius of Wren, whose choicest offerings have hitherto been brought to the shrines of philosophy and the mathematics, becomes chiefly consecrated to architecture.

But if the different arts require these qualities in different proportions, then few men, under the most favourable circumstances for an uniform development, could be equal in all: an artist might have sufficient of each to be proficient in all, but he would shine out more brilliantly in one than in another.—In the one to which the proportion of his qualities was the nearest approximation,—supposing him, at the same time, equally devoted by study and practice to all; and he would, therefore, attain eminence in one or the other, according to the proportion in which these powers were possessed by him. We can, however, imagine an artist enjoying in so perfect a degree the powers enumerated as to possess the entire secret of art-unity, and become equally master of each of the arts. This would, however, require such a felicitous conjunction of time, means, and physical temperament, as perhaps rarely, if ever, falls to the lot of humanity. Moreover, under no circumstances perhaps would the attempt at such mastery be politic. Leonardo da Vinci (the Crichton of art), who not only in some degree mastered the entire magic circle of fine art, but also excelled in engineering, chemistry, anatomy, mathematics, and philosophy, has been blamed by all subsequent artists for his non-perseverance as a painter: his versatility has been a subject of regret, under the persuasion that had he taken possession of the one art, he would have carried certain qualities of that one art to perfection, when, as it is, his works are of comparatively little value.

However correct, then, the above assertion, it is not in our power to cite an adequate example of its practicability; but it would not be difficult to bring forward names of many who, celebrated, and deservedly so, in some one of the arts, possessed at the same time a by no means trivial power over some one or more of the others, joined with a delicacy of feeling and correctness of discrimination which leaves us no room to doubt that, had they enjoyed or achieved equal opportunities, they would have attained to equal eminence. To this the objection may be raised that I have laid too much stress upon opportunity, and thereby destroyed the standing ground of genius, which works by inspiration, and makes its opportunities. Remarks which I shall make under the next head will, I trust, be deemed, a sufficient reply to it.

Not to go back, as we might do, to antiquity, we find that many of the greatest architects of the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries of Italy, as well as several of their fore-runners of the preceding ages, gave evidence of great skill in painting, or sculpture, or both. Most of the great restorers of architecture were painters and sculptors. Buono, the architect first named by Vasari, and who lived as early as the twelfth century, was a sculptor likewise, as was also one of the architects of the Campanile at Pisa. Brunelleschi, Palladio, San Gallo, Sansovino, and Ammanati, also exercised the chisel of the sculptor along with the

* See page 116, ante.